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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how a predominantly white elementary school responded to a school-district reorganization effort to promote ethnic balance among the schools. The redistricting plan reassigned some former students to other schools and bused in many Spanish-speaking students. The school staff encountered language problems with the new students and their families. The school acquired an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teacher, included parents on the school-based management team, recognized multicultural role models and volunteers, sponsored parent-orientation and welcoming programs, and promoted parent-school conferences. Teachers enrolled in a community-education Spanish class. Limited-English-speaking students were not penalized for not being able to perform in a language unfamiliar to them. Staff emphasized areas in which students were successful and marked report cards with the statement, "Grades adjusted due to language development." Other strategies to help the new students achieve included home visits, group sessions, cooperative assessment, whole-language strategies, peer tutoring, and portfolio assessment. The key factor of success was a focus on school attitude rather than on instruction. An endnote states that the 1995 results of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills designated the school as a "recognized campus" for student success in all demographic and cultural subgroups. (LMI)

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A SCHOOL IN CHANGE

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A School in Change

Last year our school district redrew the elementary attendance zones in an effort to create ethnic balance for all campuses. Our formerly predominantly white campus now has a rich mixture of Hispanic and Black students. The road to achieving this "rich mixture" has not been easy though. We have been faced with many adversities and perception problems from the beginning. The strategies that we have developed have helped our "school in change" to overcome the nay-sayers and to continue to propagate our image of academic excellence in a positive learning environment. Our demographic make-up may have changed, but our attitude and "can-do" spirit has not. We still expect success for every child.

When the redistricting plans were first announced, they were met with some very grave concerns in the community. In order to make room on our campus for the children who would now be bused to us, many former children would be reassigned to other campuses. Their parents were unhappy. First, they were well pleased with our school and did not have any desire to leave. In fact, they adamantly did not want to leave and definitely let their voices be heard in the community. Secondly, they felt they had bought or built their homes with the understanding that they were in this attendance zone. Now that the lines were redrawn they felt the decision would adversely affected their property values. The fact that a community question and answer session was held by the school board after the realignment decision was all ready made did little to mend anger and frustration. These parents did go on to their

new campuses, but did it under duress and, many times, with hostility. If there had been a planned effort to ostracize parents, it could not have been more effective.

Meanwhile, parents of our new students who were being bused in had their own set of concerns. They were not thrilled with their children leaving their neighborhood school to attend our campus which is completely across town. Several expressed concerns that they would not have transportation to come pick up their child if he became sick during the school day. Others expressed more generalized worries that their children would not "fit in." They worried their children would feel awkward. In short, they were uncertain if they or their children would be happy on their new campus.

So, we started the year with our work cut out for us. We had to "mend fences" with *both* sets of parents. It was not an easy task. The one shining star through all of this was our teachers' attitudes. Although there were some people who thought we would react to the restructuring with wailing and gnashing of teeth, this did not happen. Our teachers rose to the occasion, looked at the naysayers as if they were insane, and said, "Send us anybody! We are here to teach, to get the best from each child, and we couldn't begin to care where he lives or what color his skin is. By the time we get through with them, they will all be Grizzlies (our campus mascot), and we will soar with the eagles!" This is the very attitude that was to prove to be the strength to carry us through. This is the attitude that any campus must have to be a

school in change and to succeed.

Once school started and every child was registered at the newly appropriate campus, things began to settle down. The first problem that we knew we were going to have to overcome was language related. Most of our new students' primary home language is Spanish. Not one of us spoke Spanish and we had no ESL or Bilingual teacher or program. Obviously, we were in poor shape. Besides the obvious academic difficulties, the language barrier was a continual frustration. Besides the instructional difficulties, there was always a communication gap. For example, our cafeteria offers each child a choice of two entries for lunch. The teachers take a count of how many children desire each entry in the mornings. The first morning of school teachers were frantically trying to figure out how to describe the difference between a corn dog and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich to little non-English speaking children. The main word that teachers were trying to discern was, "rest room." One teacher swore that the only word Chuy could say was, "Sharpen! Sharpen!" and point to his pencil. What worried her was this was Chuy's fourth year in school! If all he could say was, "sharpen," the teacher thought we were in serious trouble!

The teachers said they knew things had really changed when at the end of the first day of school when I, the Anglo principal, started announcements with a cheerful, "Buenos dias!!" This was followed up a few days later with a teacher memo that began, "Hay alguien aqui que hable Ingles??" which interpreted means, "Does

anyone here speak English???"

A cheerful attitude became the order of the day as teachers desperately tried to learn basic survival Spanish. Teachers who didn't even know "Hola!" were cheerfully sharing words and phrases they had picked up from the students, parents, or any stranger off the streets during the first weeks of school. One afternoon after school a teacher made a short sentence in Spanish. Another teacher responded with an equally short sentence in Spanish. At this point the first teacher rolled off several sentences in sequence in Spanish. A third teacher was quite impressed and said, "I didn't know you knew how to speak Spanish!" She replied, "I don't. I know two sentences and you just heard them." The second teacher said, "We're impressed, but what did you say?" The first teacher replied, "This is a cat. The cat drinks milk."

Everyone was very impressed! It sounded good to us! Besides, we serve milk in the cafeteria every day. We all learned a new useful word from one of our own! Besides that, we were sincerely trying to learn and utilizing any avenue available to do it.

WELCOMING STRATEGIES

Before school began we planned a special Open House especially for our new transfer students. The purpose of the Open House was both to acquaint the new students with their new campus and to appease their anxieties. We mailed individual invitations both in Spanish and in English to everyone and told them our PTA would provide refreshments. We realized food was an extrinsic motivator, but we were willing to try anything. On the appointed evening the

program began with an opening presentation in the school cafeteria. I welcomed everyone and assured them we were aware of their concerns and would be working very diligently to make sure their children's transition was as smooth and as painless as possible. Children who were members of the previous year's Student Council and Safety Patrol were invited. The Safety Patrol members gave a demonstration of our campus safety procedures. Who could not respond to eleven year old smiling faces? The Student Council members then led the parents and children on tours of the campus and gymnasium. Every teacher showed up for this Orientation Open House even though it was still summertime. Their contracts had not begun, and they knew they did not have to come. They came because they wanted to. They met with the parents and children and sincerely answered their questions and addressed their concerns. By the end of the evening it was clearly evident that we were over the anxiety hump for both the parents and the teachers. We had brought the two groups together in a nonmandatory, nonstressful situation complete with cookies and punch. We let everyone get together and find out that in the end they are just parents who want the best for their children and we are just a campus who wants to see to it that they get just that.

The second week of school we followed up our Transfer Orientation Open House with a Parent Orientation Night to which all parents were invited. We gave this Orientation Night a big publicity push in the local newspaper, in the classrooms, over the public address system, with notes home, and with our campus

newsletter, the "Bear Tracks." On this evening we encouraged parents to leave their young children at home, and to come for an intense night of actually sitting down with their child's teacher without the distraction of little ones and learning the specifics of our campus mission, our goals for both the campus and each child, the teachers's policies for homework, tests, and grading, as well as our campus expectations for academics, attendance, and behavior. We even went over our bus rules. At our school we strongly feel every child may not be capable of making straight A's, but every child is capable of learning to become a good citizen.

During Parent Orientation each parent had the opportunity to ask questions, set up individual parent conferences, and become familiar with all campus opportunities. If a parent did not have anyone to leave their children with for this serious and important evening, we provided *babysitting free of charge*. Many of our transfer parents took us up on the babysitting. It was hard enough for them to find transportation to the school at night. They really appreciated the babysitting. It was our way of showing how committed we are to each family having a clear understanding of our focus for the year for their child. New and transfer parents were particularly complimentary of this program whereby teachers got truly specific with their goals and expectations, alleviating miscommunication and wrong information down the line.

Soon after school started we staged a "Welcome to Gerard" assembly program. A community member who does magic shows was

begged and/or coerced to come put on a great show at our campus for free. As part of his introduction, throughout the show at appropriate moments, and during his closure, he made comments and references to how great it was to have so many new children at Gerard this year, how wonderful an opportunity it was for everyone to be able to make new friends, and how educational it was for all students to have the opportunity to learn a new language, whether that language would be Spanish or English. The magic show was a big success and so were the lessons he was seeking to portray.

Communication continued to be a problem. Three weeks after school started the district hired us an ESL teacher. Her first day on the job she was greeted almost as joyfully as the French greeted the Allied soldiers at Normandy! No teacher has ever met with such joy, warmth, and anticipation as our new ESL teacher. Although she spoke significantly more Spanish than we did, she was not fluent either. Language problems continued to come up where she had problems communicating too. We continued to do as we had done before she came: turn to our Hispanic parents for help. Not surprisingly, they were anxious to help us because *they could sense our sincerity, that we genuinely did care and did want to help their children. Besides that, they understood we were in a bind. Being asked to help us helped them to feel needed and respected.*

Early in the year we had a problem with seven year old Miguel who could not only cuss, he could do it in two languages. We had ourselves a bilingual cusser. The ESL teacher spent a day trying to figure out how to write a note to his parents to convey what we

thought was this simple message: No more cussing. It's just the Spanish language does not have a direct translation for "cussing." Finally, we asked one of our Hispanic parents for help. She worried over it too. Finally, after resorting to a Spanish/English dictionary and discussing it with several others she worked up what she thought was a polite, but firm letter for Miguel's parents. I thanked her profusely and gave it to my secretary to type. Later the same mother asked me if her letter had been all right. The limit to my Spanish was two years in high school long ago so I responded, "You're asking ME???" But, the letter must have helped because Miguel has definitely slowed down his bilingual cussing!

When the community theater was bringing their production of, "You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown" to our campus we were met with the additional dilemma of sending home notes to the entire student population...in Spanish and English. Again, we resorted to our parents for help in translating the note. After we sent it out we had so many positive comments from both the English speaking and Spanish speaking parents showing appreciation for our thoughtfulness and equal status given to both languages.

CROSSING THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

Perhaps our greatest immediate help was the hiring of our ESL teacher. With her spontaneous personality, natural warmth, and much greater command of the Spanish language than any of the rest of us, she immediately gave the Hispanic children someone they could at least verbalize openly with. She could help us translate the cafeteria menus! (We were grateful for small blessings!) She

also became the children's surrogate and friend. As they came to know her, it was her room that they would stop by in the mornings and afternoons on their way to and from their regular classes. She provided each of us a connection on campus to each other's worlds.

One particularly effective strategy our ESL teacher utilized with the students who could read and write some in English was a journal writing project. She gave each student a spiral notebook and encouraged them to, "Write to me. Write anything." This helped them apply the language skills they had been learning both in the classroom and in their daily lives. They developed their vocabulary, their sentence construction, transfer skills, and thinking skills. But the best part was yet to come. The teacher took the project one step farther and said, "I will write you back!" which she did! This motivated the students to write meaningfully in their journals because they wanted her to write meaningfully back! The writing project further developed their comprehension skills, their application skills in decoding, additional new vocabulary, and was a true motivator in the most difficult of language acquisitions: written communication.

Our teachers really wanted to learn the Spanish language. I hit the local bookstore and bought Spanish/English dictionaries, books, tapes, and flip charts. We passed them around campus, looking to see who could find the translation first for "rest room!" But, books and tapes were not enough. We wanted and needed more help. After considerable begging, the school district offered a Community Education class after school from 4:00 - 5:30 on our

campus for all school employees who were interested in learning Conversational Spanish. Attendance was the highest on the day the instructor was going to interpret the cuss words. Everyone was dying to know what the students were really saying! This lasted for six weeks and helped everyone considerably with both the language and the culture of the people we were learning to love so much.

We sought out Hispanic volunteers to help us both in the classrooms and around the campus. Believing it was good for our children to see role models from all races we actively sought culturally different parents and citizens to take a more active involvement at Gerard. We asked minority parents to serve on our Site Based Management team so they could give us their thoughts and suggestions of any additional ways we could better serve their children that we may not have thought of. *Most of all, we listened.* Most of the Hispanic parents were initially shy. We are still working on that. But, for the most part, the more we sought them out, asked them questions, and listened to them, the more they opened up to us.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Our district chose not to provide us with Bilingual instruction, but rather to stick with the ESL program whereby all the limited English as well as the non-English speaking students were serviced in the ESL classroom for only 45 minutes a day. It is virtually a total immersion program. At first we had very strong reservations about this, and the research is still highly split on

the issue. Regardless, since this was the avenue our district selected it was up to us to make it work.

It did. Eleven weeks after school started the third grade teacher of Eduardo who came to us straight from Mexico and who could not speak a word of English, came to me with tears in her eyes and said, "Eduardo just read The Fish in the Dish IN ENGLISH!!!" Her joy was obviously contagious as everyone she told expressed their own glee and congratulations! Her classroom staged their own mini-celebration! A day later she continued to beam as she reported Eduardo was also able to utilize transfer skills, associating a picture in one area to the correct word in another! "YEA!!" cried all of Gerard! Eduardo is really learning English! The final hurrah came on November 1 when given the choice between pizza and beef stew for lunch, little Eduardo, age 8, proudly proclaimed, "PIZZA!!" Yea, Eduardo!! It was his first time to select his own lunch in English. We're going to master this language thing yet!! There really is truth to this listening to a language, then speaking, then reading, and lastly being able to write it. It is sequential, and we are getting there one tiny step at a time.

Another difficult thing for our classroom teachers was grading. We felt as a campus that it was unfair to penalize the limited or non-English speaking child academically for not being able to perform skills in a language they did not know. This made our communication with parents even more important. It was important that we keep in close contact with them, utilizing

conferences, home visits, group sessions, cooperative assessment, whole language strategies, peer tutoring, and portfolio assessment. We modified the curriculum to meet individual needs. Most of our new students were relatively strong in math, so we played up their successes in that area. We made sure we documented each step of mastery, no matter how small that success was. Finally, at report card time, we marked their report cards in Spanish and English with the statement, "Grades adjusted due to language development."

At Gerard we have traditionally placed a high value on individual parent conferences. Each year we utilize parent volunteers to provide release time for all our first grade teachers to schedule midterm parent conferences with every parent. The rest of our grades schedule their conferences periodically throughout the year. We begin early, obviously, with any child we feel may be headed for academic, attendance, or behavioral difficulty. We feel an ounce of proactive prevention and a strong dose of parental intervention, are worth many a pound of remediation.

If a parent does not come to a conference, we go to them with a home visit. This year we have taken an interpreter with us to make sure we can communicate with a non-English speaking parent. In each instance the non-English speaking parent has been so impressed and touched that the school would go this extra step to help their child succeed in school and to have a productive day. Each time we have been graciously extended hospitality in their home, no matter how meager their home may be. They are impressed with our effort and our diligence as well as our concern.

SOCIALIZATION

We have worked hard to make sure we are addressing the needs of the whole child and not just the academic part of him. We believe learning should be fun. We also believe *our school is a family*. We work hard for everyone to get to know everyone. We stress that every staff member, not just the teachers, is responsible for the well being of every child.

We have seen to it that every new child has been worked into the social framework of our school. Beginning on the first day of school our counselor took individual Polaroid pictures of each new child. We made a huge bulletin board in the cafeteria labeled, "New Grizzlies," and posted each child's picture for everyone to see. Later we gave each child the picture of himself to keep. They loved that. When we had the annual Student/Faculty Volleyball game the P.E. teacher saw to it that the new children were encouraged to participate on their grade's team. Most of them did. All of us had a great time as the whole school brought small chairs out on our back parking lot for an afternoon of good, clean fun and competition between the children and the staff. We sold nachos and Pepsi. Parents came and several times were solicited into the game as we, the staff, were in great danger of being defeated by the fifth grade team. The fifth graders ended up beating us, we beat the fourth grade, and the fourth grade beat the fifth grade. What more could you ask? *Everyone went home a winner!* Like a frozen slice of film, I wondered during all the color and excitement of the game if this was really the campus that so many

people had worried would not be able to handle the change from it's cultural lack of diversity to a "rich mixture" of all hands lifted together to meet *common goals*, whether those goals are winning a volleyball game or winning in the game of life.

Yes, we still have a long way to go. But we have come so far. I sincerely doubt that there will ever be anyone else who will doubt our ability to change, to meet new challenges, to adapt our teaching styles and techniques to meet the needs of any child. We needed this exposure to a new and different culture. It was unsettling because it expanded paradigms and challenged the way we traditionally instructed with great success because those ways no longer generated the same successes with every child.

Our new parents are behind us now. As one new mother said after our Orientation Open House, "I have never been to a school where the teachers spelled out so many details of exactly what they would be teaching my child this year, what they expected from him, and what they needed from me. I am impressed. I was worried about coming over here, but I shouldn't have. This is the best school my son has ever gone to. You people really care about him."

A grandmother shared the same sentiments. "I am a single grandmother raising my two granddaughters. One of them has a learning disability and had been in special education at her previous school. I was worried about her coming over here, keeping up, and if she would fit in. Instead, you have called me for an ARD and are wanting to bring my granddaughter out of the resource room for more hours a day. You say she can do it. You have made

her believe she can do it. Thank you so much for changing her attitude about herself! All of the discipline problems we were having with her at her other school have disappeared. I think it is because you have taught her to appreciate herself just the way she is. Thank you!!"

Last, there is the mother who was very disappointed her daughter would have to come to our school because she wanted her to attend the same elementary school that she had attended as a child. Now that Whitney is with us, she has learned to love us. Both Whitney and her mother marched with our school in the annual Homecoming Parade and had a great time. This mother who so wanted her daughter to attend the elementary school she had attended made both Whitney and her cousin matching T-shirts with "Gerard Grizzlies" painted on them to wear in the parade. We haven't heard another word about wanting to move Whitney back to the other school.

We have done many things to create this change. Some of them have been easy...It is easy to love a child. Some of them have been much more difficult such as changing instructional methods that have been successful for us in the past and learning to at least be quasi-conversant in a new and different language. *But the key factor has not been instructionally related. It has been in attitude.* We made up their minds before the new children ever came that we were going to do whatever was necessary to create successful, happy, productive young children. It hasn't been easy. Change never is. When all our children finish at Gerard we will

send them onto the intermediate school as solid young people, ready to meet change in their lives, secure in their background academically and in who they are as individuals. They are Gerard Grizzlies and every one of them is the "BEARY" best!

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Since this article was written, I have left the principalship of Gerard to become a professor of school administration at the University of Texas at Arlington. The 1995 results of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills have shown Gerard to be a "Recognized Campus" for student success in *all demographic and cultural subgroups*. I salute and congratulate this wonderful, loving campus where *every child not only learns, but learns very, very well!!!!* I love you, Grizzlies!